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THE FABRICATOR

JACK RITCHIE

Last night he had been drunk. This morning he was sober, but still adamant. "I want him dead."

"Yes, sir," I said.

Mr. Winters is quite rich, spoiled rotten, and occasionally mad.

The "him" Winters referred to was Leander McCullum. The previous night at their club, McCullum had had the temerity to catch Winters cheating at gin rummy. Strong words and then blows had been exchanged.

Winters glared at me. "When I said I want McCullum dead, Clarence, I *mean* I want him dead. Take care of the matter immediately."

"Sir," I said patiently, "I think there must be some limits as to what you may expect of me."

He became more specific. "I didn't mean that I want you *personally* to kill McCullum. I mean that I want you to find me someone who will do the job. In other words, a professional killer."

"Yes, sir," I said automatically, and then put the matter out of my mind.

I am Winters's personal secretary. I am also his valet, his travel agent, his chauffeur, his whatever-the-occasion-demands.

The job pays well. I travel a good deal, always with the best in accommodations, and I enjoy the finest of meals. The job is not physically demanding, but it is galling to be at someone's beck and call twenty-four hours a day.

The next morning Winters was at me again. "Well, Clarence, what have you been doing about it?"

"Doing about what, sir?"

"Finding me a professional killer."

"Oh, that, sir. Well, it's rather difficult to find a professional killer. They don't advertise, you know."

He regarded me stonily. "Clarence, I pay you a good salary and I expect results. Or don't you *like* your job?"

"I do, sir. I do."

"Then get me that professional killer. You have until Friday." He drew a finger across his throat. "Friday, Clarence."

During the course of the years, I have had to perform some rather bizarre

errands for my employer, but none of them included solicitation for murder. I did not intend to begin now.

However, something had to be done. I was confident that even Winters would, after a bit more time, realize the madness of what he proposed and back down. In the meantime, however, he had to be appeased.

Obviously the thing to do now was to *pretend* that I had established contact with a murderer. And that the negotiations with that killer would be rather prolonged. Yes, I would stall and stall.

The next day, Winters tapped a foot. "Well?"

I smiled. "Sir, I have finally managed to track down a professional killer."

Winters seemed surprised. "You have, Clarence? How the devil did you manage to do that?"

"Sir, if one is searching for a killer, one looks for a person who has killed before. One can find such names in the newspapers. We constantly read of murderers who have served the required twelve years and eight months of their life sentences and have been paroled. While you appeared before your club's Expulsion Committee yesterday afternoon, I took the liberty of going to our city's chief newspaper and utilizing its morgue. I consulted newspapers which were several years old and then selected the names of men who had been paroled and have since had time enough to settle down and get their names into the telephone book. I then made some discreet phone calls. By the way, sir, what action did the Expulsion Committee take?"

His face darkened. "No decision has been reached yet. What is the name of this professional killer?"

I directed a mental apology toward my departed Italian grandmother. "Marchetti."

Winters went off, but returned immediately with a phone book. "There are six Marchettis in the book. Which one?"

"The first."

"A. Marchetti? What's the A stand for?"

"Angelo."

He tasted that. "I suppose he's with the Mafia?"

"Body and soul."

Winters lit a cigar. "I want McCullum killed this Friday night. Between eight and midnight."

"*This* Friday night, sir? That would be rather pushing it. Angelo usually likes to take his time. Two or three weeks to case the contract, so to speak."

"*This* Friday, Clarence. I'm paying the bill and I call the shots. I'll be spending the evening at Thompson's. It's his wedding anniversary and he's having a party. There'll be half a hundred people there who will swear I didn't leave the house all evening. How much does Angelo want for the job?"

I grasped at this possible out. If the price were too high, Winters might call it off. "One hundred thousand dollars, sir."

Winters was clearly shocked. "One hundred thousand dollars? Can't you get anybody cheaper?"

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"Not at this stage of the game, sir. I don't think Angelo would take kindly to being underbid. You know how touchy these professional killers are."

Winters chewed on his cigar. "Oh, well, I suppose in this inflationary spiral we've got to expect everything to go up. It's a deal, Clarence."

He departed, only to return later in the day with a briefcase. He opened it to show me the currency. "One hundred thousand dollars. In small bills."

I took the briefcase up to my room and emptied it upon my bedspread. One hundred thousand dollars.

Why didn't I just take the money and run?

No. While one hundred thousand dollars is quite a bit of money, was it really enough to make it worthwhile to sever one's ties with friends, relatives, and familiar geography to lead the life of a fugitive? One might enjoy the money for a year or two, but then what?

I sighed. No, I would have to return the money to Winters and inform him that Angelo Marchetti was not a professional killer. I would undoubtedly be fired. Losing my job did not exactly fill me with terror, but it would be an economic inconvenience.

I stared at the money again. Would I kill anyone for one hundred thousand dollars?

Certainly not. Not for one hundred thousand dollars. What was my price? Did I have one?

An idea which had been nipping at my mind now took hold.

Suppose that Angelo Marchetti really did murder McCullum? And then suppose that he decided to blackmail Winters? Could he parlay that one hundred thousand dollars into a million?

I was aware that the question had now changed. Would I murder for *one million* dollars?

I gave that a good five minutes thought.

Yes, I would.

At dinner Winters informed me that he would be at the meeting of his Power Boat Squadron at the yacht club for the rest of the evening and that he would drive himself.

I watched him go and then made myself a drink. A double.

Winters wanted McCullum killed tomorrow night, but now that I was primed for the job, why couldn't I do it this very night? Winters would be at the club and on meeting nights he seldom got back before midnight. He had his alibi.

I went to Winters's gun collection and selected a revolver. I inserted cartridges into the chambers and slipped the weapon into my pocket. I consulted the telephone book for McCullum's address.

When I reached McCullum's apartment building, I studied the mail slots in the foyer and then took a self-service elevator to the seventh floor.

I pressed the buzzer at No. 706 and waited, my hand on the revolver in my pocket.

McCullum opened the door. He had seen me once or twice before, how-

ever since it is my function to remain always in the background, I do not think that he recognized me.

I took a deep breath and then discovered to my intense embarrassment that I just could *not* bring myself to pull the gun out of my pocket. I simply could not kill another human being.

I smiled weakly. "Is this the Garibaldi residence?"

McCullum was annoyed. "No." The door closed.

The next morning, after I dressed, I carried the briefcase downstairs.

I found Winters waiting.

He eyed the briefcase. "Taking the money to Angelo? Lucky I caught you in time. I've decided to call the whole thing off."

I blinked.

"The chairman of the Expulsion Committee phoned early this morning. They've decided to let the matter pass. McCullum accuses and I deny and there were no witnesses. So there isn't much point in killing McCullum now. He didn't get me kicked out of the club."

I stared at him. Somehow I was outraged. My voice rose. "Call it off? Do you think it is as simple as that? Angelo and the Mafia will be furious. After all, the Mafia expected to pocket half of the money, and the organization is not one to trifle with."

Winters showed uneasiness. "Well, I guess calling off a thing like that at the last minute could cause some hard feelings. I tell you what I'll do. Have them cancel the murder and let them keep the money."

I was not through. "Sir, there is still the question of the penalty."

"Penalty? What penalty?"

"The penalty for calling off the deal. In my negotiations with Angelo, he mentioned a similar case and the penalty imposed. The Mafia will feel that you have been toying with it. That your intention to buy a murder was not entirely sincere. That you might even be writing a book about their operations. Sir, feelings must be assuaged. Suspicions quelled. Money must pass hands. The penalty will undoubtedly be another one hundred thousand dollars."

Winters wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and then nodded, though reluctantly. "All right. Two hundred thousand in all. Take care of it, Clarence."

I did.

I also decided to wait one more year before I told Winters what he could do with his job. I preferred that he never connect my departure with the loss of his two hundred thousand dollars.

In the meantime, I began crossing off the days on my calendar. ♀

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